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ABSTRACT

A result of Australia's Community Information Sharing Service (CISS) study of community information services currently being provided by public libraries in New South Wales, this report (one of three) presents five general principles which can assist public libraries with decisions about their response to the issue of the provision of community information. CISS suggests that libraries (1) get to know the community by compiling a community profile which includes information about the people, the socio-economic environment, the activities and interests of the community, its information demands, and its information resources; (2) set objectives pertaining to the role of a public library-based community information service; (3) consider cooperation with other community information agencies; (4) collect and update information relevant to the objectives of the service; and (5) organize information in a way that best suits the information demands which the system is designed to meet. A bibliography cites four sources dealing with information systems and services. (FM)

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COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICES

IN NEW SOUTH WALES

PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Guidelines

by

Eugenia Lovelace

CISS
(Community Information Sharing Service)
in association with

The Library Council of New South Wales

Sydney 1979

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PREFACE

The proposal for this study was formulated by a group of CISS (Community Information Sharing Service) members in 1977. Funding was sought and obtained from the Library Council of New South Wales and the study was undertaken between July 1978 and July 1979.

As well as acknowledging the initial debt owing to CISS members who formulated the proposal, and to the Library Council of New South Wales who funded the study, I also wish to thank the Steering Committee who were a constant source of information, ideas and support. In particular, the help of Carol Yuen, Information Services Consultant, Public Libraries Division, State Library of New South Wales, and Jo McIntyre, Assistant State Librarian, Information Services, State Library of New South Wales, was invaluable.

Without seeking to lessen the contribution of those whose help has already been acknowledged a major debt of gratitude is owed to the people who provided the information upon which the Study is based.

Finally, I would like to thank Frances Lovejoy, School of Sociology, University of New South Wales, for help with the statistical analyses of the data.

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SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

Public libraries have been criticized for failing to be responsive to the every day information needs of people in the community. Comment has also been made to the effect that the information services offered by libraries have suffered because of insufficient co-operation with, and understanding of, other information agencies.

It was believed that practical guidelines for public libraries establishing or developing community information services, that is, services providing information about the services, programmes and activities available in the community, were necessary if developments to make such comments anachronistic were to take place.

Thus a study was undertaken in an attempt to develop practical guidelines for:

- i) Co-operation and co-ordination between libraries and other agencies
- ii) The collecting and up-dating of information
- iii) A 'best practice' classification and indexing system
- iv) Publicity and promotion
- v) Initiating, expanding and evaluating services.

Three methods were used in the study: a questionnaire; observations and discussions; and an inter-active process with other agencies involved in information for the community.

A questionnaire survey was the method chosen to collect the data for a factual over-view of public library activities. This was supplemented by statistical data supplied by the Public Libraries Division of the State Library of New South Wales. Questionnaires were sent to all central service points in New South Wales, 103 libraries, of which 97 (94%) were returned. Questionnaires were also received from 99 branch libraries. Over-all the questionnaire findings showed that the level of activity of public libraries in community information services was insufficient for any factual over-view to provide the information upon which to develop guidelines based on a "successful" service. For example, only 25 libraries kept a record of queries received; only 40 libraries had a card file of any sort. On any randomly chosen day one could, on the basis of the questionnaire findings, predict that only 18% of public libraries would have received a community information query: and of these the majority would be for information about sport, cultural, recreational, educational or governmental matters. Co-operative activities with other agencies were also a minority activity. Favoured methods of collecting and up-dating information were person-to-person contact followed by scanning local newspapers, notice-boards etc.

Problems mentioned included the time involved and the constant changing of the information. Only a minority (16) libraries indicated that they used a standardized system for organizing their information files.

In brief, data from the questionnaire survey showed that public library participation in community information services was at an embryonic and uneven stage of development. The findings provided a skeleton upon which to develop guidelines: these, however, had to be fleshed out from the data obtained through the other methods used in the study.

Observations of library services and discussions with librarians were conducted, some in conjunction with visits made by the Information Services Consultant of the Public Libraries Division of the State Library of New South Wales. From these discussions and visits it became apparent that, even among those libraries offering, or planning to offer, a community information service, the objectives of the services were rarely thought out in detail. From discussions and information obtained through CISS meetings it also became apparent that the library trying to provide a direct service was not the only alternative, for example, service could be given indirectly by assisting other agencies with their information service. However, such activities require a familiarity with other agencies' services and objectives not generally shown by the public libraries contacted. It also became apparent that collecting and up-dating information was immensely time-consuming and dependent on an effective network of personal contacts. The *LOCOM method of organizing information seemed to be appropriate and satisfactory to those libraries who were using it. (2)

A third method used in the study was that of working jointly with non-library information agencies on information-related projects: the inter-active process. The purposes of this activity were threefold. It was hoped that the knowledge and skills of librarianship would be of help to non-library agencies establishing or improving their information services. It was also an attempt to foster mutual understanding between library and non-library information agencies. Another purpose was to maintain and develop a knowledge of the non-library sector's activities in order to have a perspective against which to attempt to delineate the potential role of the public library.

These purposes were ones which it was believed any public library embarking on, or engaging in, a community information service would need to consider. Thus, the inter-active process was seen to mirror broadly what would be involved for any public library attempting to co-operate with non-library agencies.

*LOCOM is a system for organizing community resources developed for the Council of Social Service of New South Wales (NCOSS)

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Through the pursuit of the inter-active process the awareness that to the non-library sector information is a tool to be used to achieve certain purposes was fleshed out into a realization. It also became evident that there was often a lack of clear definition of these purposes. They included purposes such as community services development, i.e., the provision of information about services in the community to facilitate the utilization of those services; community work, for example, helping people to cut red-tape; community action, for example, helping people to learn how to cut red-tape for themselves; and community development which is concerned with improving the well-being of people and communities by involving people themselves in identifying and resolving issues of concern to their well-being.

To serve these different purposes different methods for the organization and dissemination of information are required. However, there did not appear to be, among the non-library sector, an awareness of the complexities and purposes of the various methods of classifying and indexing information. The time and skills involved in collecting and up-dating information were similarly unappreciated.

Strong emphasis was given to the role of informal, personal information networks. Libraries, regarded as buildings with books, were not part of this personal network and were generally misunderstood or ignored. Through the inter-active process librarians, as people with knowledge about information systems and resources, began to be appreciated as a valuable part of the personal network and this gave the opportunity to explain what libraries could offer. However, it was again a time-consuming, very personal activity: two adjectives characteristic of all aspects of community information service.

Finally, a major lesson learnt through the inter-active process was that equal participation is essential for co-operation. It must be a give and take situation in which the other side is also allowed to participate in the giving.

Table 1 (see page 5) summarizes briefly the major findings of the study upon which the guidelines have been developed. Full details of the study methodology and findings are reported elsewhere. (3)

The guidelines that have emerged from the study differ from those initially proposed. First it has not been possible to develop standard guidelines for specific tasks applicable to all libraries since it has become evident that the type of service will vary from community to community. Secondly, it has become apparent that the proposed guidelines over-looked two activities which the study has shown to be essential pre-requisites to a responsive service: getting to know the community and setting objectives.

Thus, the first guideline is concerned with getting to know the community - its social and economic characteristics, its activities and issues of concern. Then determining how the library can respond to the information needs of the community, setting objectives, is the

second area considered. The objectives of the service will affect the type of co-operative activities undertaken and the activities involved in collecting, up-dating and organizing information, thus, guidelines in these areas have to be considered within the context of the objectives of the service.

Finally, it has not been possible to develop guidelines for publicity and promotion of services, nor for initiating, expanding and evaluating services since the over-all level of activity precluded the making of any such recommendations.

STUDY AIMS

STUDY FINDINGS

GUIDELINES

	Questionnaire Survey	Observations and discussions: library-sector	Inter-active Process: non- library sector	
Factual over-view of public library participation in community information	1) An uneven state of development 2) Low level of activity	1) An uneven state of development 2) Low level of activity 3) Lack of objectives 4) Variety of possible roles depending on community need	1) An uneven state of development 2) Lack of objectives 3) Variety of possible roles depending on community need	GET TO KNOW THE COMMUNITY SETTING OBJECTIVES
1) Nature of referr- als from and to public libraries	1) Mostly between libraries and CAIC: library referrals tend to be about health & welfare; CAIC referrals tend to be about sport, culture and education.	1) Little understand- ing of other agencies' objectives	1) Little understanding of library objectives	CO-OPERATION
2) Nature of co- operative activities	2) Few co-operative activities: mostly between libraries and CAIC	2) Little personal contact with other agencies	2) Little personal contact with libraries	
1) Methods used for collecting information	1) Person-to-person contact, scanning local newspapers, notice-boards etc.	1) Personal contact essential	1) Emphasis on using personal networks	COLLECTING INFORMATION
2) Methods used for up-dating information	2) As above Problems of time and need for continual up-dates	2) As above	2) Little awareness of the problems in information up-dating	UP-DATING INFORMATION
Methods used for organizing information	Few libraries use a standardized system	LOCOM appears to be a satisfactory system	Little awareness of the complexities of file creation and organization	ORGANIZING INFORMATION

The following guidelines for public library participation in community information services are general guidelines based on methods that have been found to be both useful and feasible given current library resources and attitudes.

Guideline 1

GET TO KNOW THE COMMUNITY

Compiling a community profile is a systematic way of getting to know the community. A community profile will include:

*Information about the people.

This is demographic information - facts and figures such as births, deaths, age, sex, numbers of lone parents, etc.

*Information about the socio-economic environment.

The Economic Environment - What are the categories of economic activity in the community? e.g., rural, industrial, manufacturing, tourism, small business, etc.

The Service Environment - What services are available? e.g., health, welfare, transport, housing, education, information services, etc.

The Social Environment - What are the opportunities for social contact in the community? e.g., clubs, societies and the like.

Such information can be obtained from published sources such as census figures; annual reports of government departments and agencies; in task force reports and submissions. Often such information is not regularly published and has to be sought from the statistics sections of government departments and agencies. Community groups, as well as government and community agencies, are also useful sources of information bearing in mind that the information is often restricted in coverage.

*Information about the activities and interests of the community.

This includes, for example, recreational and hobby interests. Surveys, such as by questionnaire or interview, are one method of obtaining this type of information. It also includes, however, a more intangible element that can be called "communities

of interest." One librarian has described it as:

... various groupings of people - ethnic groups, historical societies, conservation groups, hobby groups and groups which get together to fight for a cause ... These groups may be aware of other groups in the area or may act in isolation. They may be permanent fixtures or may come and go as the circumstances of the time dictate. The important thing to realize is that these "communities of interest" are not static and involvement by any library needs to be a continuous process ... (4:1)

To obtain information about such interests a close involvement with service, information and community agencies is necessary. It is essential to become part of the informal personal network through which much of this information is purveyed. Attending inter-agency meetings, working with local groups are examples of methods of entering such networks. Another method of collecting such information has been described as:

... taking in your environment every time you're outside the library - notice-boards, pamphlets, broadsheets ... demos against uranium mining, demos for women, political ideologies ... produce information which you don't get access to if you stay put in the library. (4:4)

It is the inter-relationship of all these factors that give the community its socio-economic fabric, that can show the patterns of influence in the community and the target groups for whom you want to develop services. Community profiles are useful for the development of public library services generally and particularly for the development of a responsive community information service. They are also compiled for a number of other reasons such as social planning and community development. Town planners, social planning and community services staff of local government authorities are valuable sources of information and assistance. Working closely with such staff has been found, by some libraries, to be an effective way of drawing on the skills of other professions. In addition the contacts made provide an opportunity to explain the library's role and to learn about local services and activities.

For the purposes of library planning particular attention should be given to looking at information demands and information resources.

Information demands

Information demands can be assessed:

- * by getting to know the interest and concerns of the community
- * by investigating the demands made on existing information agencies
- * by talking to community service providers

Information needs, that is, information that people need or want but have not asked for, is harder to assess. A systematic investigation of information needs is probably beyond the resources of most libraries. Certainly the methods of investigation are beyond the scope of these guidelines. Libraries planning a systematic investigation are advised to work closely with individuals experienced in the area.

Information resources

Both formal and informal information resources, including radio, T.V., and the press, should be considered.

Formal resources. These include agencies that specialize in providing information and agencies that provide information as a component or adjunct of another service. For example a library or a community information centre specializes in providing information whereas a community health centre or a legal aid service provides, in addition to the direct service, information about other services.

Informal resources. These include both groups and individuals. Groups, for example, can be special interest groups such as stamp collecting clubs or resident action groups. Individuals within the community who acquire and disseminate information widely, the "gate-keepers", are also important informal information resources. Gate-keepers are sometimes individuals active or prominent within the community, for example, chemists, teachers, doctors, ministers. They are also, however, sometimes less easily identified, for example, corner-shopkeepers, post-men and individual residents.

When investigating formal information resources it is helpful to look at the following:

- *Are they generalist or specialist in coverage?
Consider, for example, a generalist community information service or a specialized health services information centre.
- *Are they visible? Consider, for example, physical location and publicity.
- *Are they accessible? Consider, for example, physical accessibility, hours of opening, restrictions on the use of the service.

*Are they organized? Consider, for example, whether the information files are systematically organized, whether directories are produced, whether information is up-dated and verified systematically.

The activities involved in providing a community information service may well differ from library to library depending on the characteristics, interests and related information and service needs and resources of the community. Getting to know the community is a continual, out of the library, time-consuming activity. A network of reliable personal contacts is essential in order to unearth and trap the often elusive, transitory and undocumented information that has to be collected. This requires staff with the ability to work closely with people with different training, assumptions and skills and staff who are alert to the spectrum of information resources in the community.

Guideline 2

SET OBJECTIVES

Once some idea has been gained of the nature of the community it is then possible to consider the appropriate role of a public library-based community information service.

The broad purpose of a community information service is to provide information for the well-being of an individual as a member of the community. The specific objectives will depend on the nature of the information demands, other information agencies and library resources. Library resources include, as well as existing information resources, management skills and attitudes; staff skills and attitudes; and financial and physical resources. These factors are all subject to change and thus the objectives of a service have to be constantly under review.

A library-based community information service is only an information service. It is not a counselling or problem solving service. No matter how well-informed or well-intentioned the librarian is, it is not a librarian's role to offer advice based on the information in the file, but rather, to provide the information contained in the file in order to assist the enquirer to make informed decisions.

The objectives of a public-library based community information service can range from:

- i - Collecting information about services, programmes and activities in the community in order:

- *to offer an enquirer the whole range of options available
- *to refer an enquirer to a specialist agency providing information on the whole range of options available
- *to link an enquirer to the service, programme or activity of his/her choice

- ii - Identifying issues of concern to the community, for example, transport problems, possum plagues, and collecting relevant information in order:

- *to provide information on all aspects of such issues

These are all only information providing activities. Other community information agencies often also aim:

- * to advise an enquirer as to the most appropriate service
- * to follow-up on the adequacy of service provision
- * to advocate for improved service provision
- * to generate demand for information on issues of concern
- * to catalyse action on issues of concern

Here the activities are using information to advise or initiate some action and so are beyond the scope of the information providing role of the librarian.

However, when the matter in question is an information matter then the whole range of activities can be seen to fall validly into the area of expertise of information professionals. Whether advocacy for improved information service is undertaken, for example, is a matter of professional role, rather than of professional skill.

The objectives of any service have to be considered within the context of library resources, information demands and other information agencies before ways of meeting them can be identified. It is important to remember that other information agencies often have objectives different to those of a public library. It is essential when setting objectives to try and find out and understand the objectives of other information agencies.

To take an extreme, and probably hypothetical example, where there is a lot of demand for information, but no information agencies, the appropriate library role would be to provide a comprehensive community information service for the whole community. On the other hand, in an equally extreme situation, where there was neither any demand nor any need for information there would be no need for an information service.

In reality it is more likely that there would be some agencies already providing some information, but probably not comprehensively, so that some demands for some types of information would not be adequately met. To help meet these unsatisfied demands three roles can be considered: subject sharing, client sharing and task sharing.

Subject Sharing.

Libraries are often seen as sources of information about sport, cultural, recreational, educational and government matters and less as sources of information about employment, pensions, benefits and legal services. Other information services, for example, Community Aid and Information Centres, are not infrequently used by public libraries as sources of information about health and welfare services. Some libraries, for example, have deliberately chosen to leave information about health and welfare services to such centres and to specialize in other areas. Granted the volume and range of services and programmes

available, particularly in urban communities, subject sharing may in some cases become a practical necessity rationalized according to the type of demands each agency receives and perceptions of information needs.

Client Sharing.

Rather than deciding to specialize in particular subject areas a library may decide to offer a specialist community information service aimed at sections of the community not being adequately served by existing information agencies. This could be, for example, a community information service for the elderly house-bound; a service for an ethnic minority and so on.

Task Sharing.

Another possible role is for the library to attempt to improve people's access to information by helping other information agencies to improve the quality of their information service, for example, help them to organize their card files; help them produce directories; supply them with information; advertise their services.

These three possible roles are not mutually exclusive. A library might offer a specialist community information service aimed at an ethnic minority together with a comprehensive service about all educational and cultural activities; and distribute information about local council services to other information agencies in the area.

Once an appropriate library role has been identified it has to be re-examined within the context of available library resources. It is essential not only that management be committed to the objectives of the service, but further that the objectives be clearly communicated to all staff. Planning must take into account possible staff resistance to change and even, at times, hostility from staff who are opposed to the concept.

Guideline 3

CONSIDER CO-OPERATION

The range of activities concerned with information for the individual's well-being as a member of a community make it evident that the library role has to be participatory. The scope and volume of information necessary for everyday living in our complex and changing society makes it virtually impossible for any one service, library-based or otherwise, to be able to collect and maintain all the relevant information. A co-operative network of information agencies appears to be necessary for the effective provision of community information. To be lasting co-operation must be based on:

- * knowledge of one's own objectives
- * knowledge of other services' objectives

Then activities that further the objectives of all parties, a joint vested interest, can be planned. This involves working out:

- * what each party is prepared to contribute, for example, skills, time
- * what each party wants in return, for example, other skills, sharing of information

At this stage some compromises and trade-offs may well have to be made in an attempt to settle on contributions and returns that are satisfactory to all parties.

Working out objectives, joint vested interests and satisfactory working partnerships is difficult and takes time and patience. However, they are essential if there is to be realistic assessment and commitment, from all sides, of the necessary resources. Joint commitment of resources is one way of developing a joint sense of ownership and thus not only a sense of possession, but also of trust and responsibility towards the task or venture or product.

An attempt at co-operation that is not thought through along the lines suggested above runs several risks.

Lack of understanding of objectives

For example, if a library plans to co-operate with another agency

in collecting information about local resources there must be understanding about each others attitudes and needs towards comprehensiveness, accuracy and up-to-dateness of information. The degree of comprehensiveness say for a library file may be quite inadequate for a counselling service.

Lack of a joint vested interest

For example, attempts at up-dating files and directories based on the hope that agencies would inform the compiler about changes etc., have often failed. This has been referred to as "lack of co-operation". It is, in the sense, that the compiler failed to set out, or explain, how the agencies' interests would be furthered by up-dating information about their activities.

Lack of equal commitment of resources

For example, a library may offer duplicates of its files to other agencies. There is a likelihood, however, that the files, not being "owned" by the agency in the sense of being their trusted product, will sit unused with people preferring to use their own, probably inferior, files or relying on the information in their heads. A sense of responsibility towards keeping the files up-to-date will also probably be lacking.

Co-operative activities based on an agreed commitment to provide community information effectively have been found to be fruitful, lasting and worth the effort.

Guideline 4

COLLECT AND UP-DATE INFORMATION

What information is to be collected will depend on the objectives of the service. For example, a library may decide to refer all enquiries regarding legal services to a local community centre, and thus not itself collect information on such services. The LOCOM Guidelines for Collecting Information (2) provide a comprehensive listing of the types of information a community information service might collect.

There are certain characteristics of community services, programmes and activities that make collecting information about them especially difficult: much of it is both undocumented and constantly changing. The time involved in collecting such information cannot be overemphasized. Common methods for collecting information include:

- * Collecting leaflets, brochures etc. issued by government and non-government agencies. Often, such publications are in limited supply, and often only available in English. Not all agencies keep reliable mailing lists. Some agencies, including government departments, are unable to identify, let alone ascertain the availability, of publications they produce.
- * Scanning directories, telephone books etc. The accuracy and comprehensiveness of such information has to be checked. As with all published sources of community information they soon become out-of-date.
- * Scanning newspapers, notice-boards, etc. Much valuable, ephemeral information can be obtained this way. Again the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the information has to be checked.
- * Person to person contact. The community information librarian's network of reliable personal contacts can yield accurate, up-to-date information. However, the volume of information that can be conveyed this way is limited by both the interests of the members and the limitations of personal recollection. The dangers of misinterpreting spoken messages has to be remembered.

Community information has to be verified. This can at times be done by telephone, but at times involves personal visits. For example, a community group may provide transport, but only on certain days. Small but sometimes important pieces of information that may be over-looked in a description of their activities.

Once collected the information rapidly becomes out-of-date and therefore six monthly up-dates are desirable. For this reason the date on which the information was collected or last verified should be noted. Common problems in up-dating are:

- * Frequent changes in details of services or facilities available, for example, hours of opening, eligibility criteria.
- * Frequent changes in the names of office-bearers or contact people, especially with voluntary groups.
- * Frequent changes in telephone numbers.
- * Disappearance of groups especially voluntary groups, communities of interest etc. Verifying that something no longer exists can be very difficult.

The experience of one library exemplifies the time involved in, and the need for, up-dating. The aim was to up-date roughly a quarter of the file every three months thus ensuring that the whole file was up-dated annually. One up-date of 123 main entry cards took the equivalent of 12 working days, spread over 6 weeks as the librarian could not be released for full-time work on up-dating alone. Of the 123 agencies, services and groups listed only 7 did not need to be amended: 104 had changed their activities, services etc, in some way; 12 had gone out of existence and in the process of up-dating 7 new services, agencies or groups were discovered.

The experience of most libraries, and other information agencies, is that response to written requests for up-dated information is poor. Even poorer is the response to requests for volunteered up-dates. The most effective method seems to be for the librarian to personally contact each service to check that the current information is still correct. Naturally, telephoning or visiting an agency to request information about details of their operations is more effective if personal contact has been previously established.

Considering the time, and effort and skill, involved in collecting and up-dating information, and also the time and effort of the agency contributing the information, the community information librarian has to walk a tight-rope:

Only collect information about community services, programmes and activities that is relevant to the objectives of the service.

and

Remember that the objectives of the service will vary according to the services, programmes and activities available and of concern to the community.

Guideline 5

ORGANIZE INFORMATION

Decisions about how information is to be organized have to be made in the light of the information demands which the information system is designed to meet. A CISS Discussion paper on information systems (1) deals with the appropriateness of different methods of organizing information, for example, alphabetico-specific and classified, for different purposes, for example, for quick reference or for planning purposes.

In general an alphabetico-specific card file listing services, programmes and activities appears to be a satisfactory method of organizing information for library-based community information services. A collection of pamphlets and similar written material is generally also required.

Few public libraries currently use a standardized system for selecting headings for their information files. This may well be because until recently there has been no easily available system designed especially for Australian community information services. One such system, the list of subject headings in the LOCOM Community Information System, was published in mid-1978. (2)

The system was pilot-tested in a number of libraries and community information centres in New South Wales and some amendments subsequently made. In general it has proven to be both appropriate and acceptable for a public library-based service. Any library planning to establish, or systematize, a card file is strongly recommended to use the LOCOM Subject Headings List in conjunction with the associated material in volume two. This material includes detailed, step-by-step advice on how to record information onto a card; how to make directions to vertical file material; and suggestions for organizing vertical file material.

The LOCOM system is still being refined and developed. It was initially designed for use by non-library information centres and hence it contains some material perhaps not necessary for a library audience. Some parts of the project have not yet been finalized, for example, the list of headings for categorizing enquiries, and thus the system is as yet incomplete. However, it is still the most comprehensive and practical manual known to be available. It contains as well as the Subject Headings List, and advice on organizing information already mentioned, suggestions for collecting and up-dating information and other useful sections, such as, lists of reference books and directories, lists of organizations issuing pamphlets and so on.

Plans for sharing files may affect the type of organization appropriate. For example, where duplicates have been made available to non-library information agencies there have been problems such as many non-library staff finding a combined main entry added entry sequence difficult and confusing

For many libraries developing a community information file will be a first attempt at creating their own information resource. Others developing a community information file will be able to draw upon their past experiences, for example, the rewards and pitfalls of compiling indexes to local newspapers, finding lists and local history files. The difference is that in indexing your community it doesn't come to you, you go to it.

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